

Sacrifices

by Laura Logan

The girl bent down to pick up the book that had fallen from her grasp. Her eyes caught the title without response: *Advanced Latin Grammar*. As she straightened up, the brisk breeze ruffled her skirt, and she fought to keep it down. It was too short, almost too short to be decent, and now she had to fight with the wind to stay covered. She raised her hand to push her hair from her eyes, and winced as she smelled the burning sweet smell of the permanent wave solution. Even my clothes smell of it, she thought.

She ran along the street, frightened by the cold waves of the wind. The only light came from the few electric lights in the houses she passed. It was dusk, and the new street lights hadn't been turned on yet. As she ran, her heavy shoes clodded and clunked, hindering her feet from bending naturally. Around the next corner she went, picking her way around some holes in the pavement. She slowed down when she realized she was close to home.

Walking now, she looked up and saw the motorcycle parked outside the door of the house. She sighed, and walked even more slowly, trying to avoid reaching the house. Bert's here again, she thought. If only he would keep away from me. If only he and Elizabeth would just leave, get married or something, then Mary's kids would be safe.

She remembered the night a few weeks before when he'd come into the bedroom she shared with the baby. Patsy had been asleep, and the sound of him limping down the hall had awakened her. When he opened the door, she'd startled him by calmly asking what he wanted. He left after making some excuse about checking the baby. Afterward, her heart pounded so hard she couldn't go to sleep until almost dawn. What if he had hurt the baby?

Thinking about her older sister's children made her remember that she had a responsibility, and she hurried again to walk up the concrete steps to the house. "Patsy's home," she heard a voice inside say. "Good, it's time for her to put the children to bed," another voice said.

Patsy's heart rose in her throat as her hand touched the doorknob. She hesitated, and then turned it, squinting as the light from inside hurt her eyes. She entered, closed the door, and locked it.

"No need to lock it, babe. I'll be leavin' soon." Patsy felt a slap on her behind as she walked through the living room. She whirled around and glared at Bert. Her eyes narrowed to slits. Not soon enough for me, you hoodlum, she thought. As she walked to the back of the house, she was glad that the angle hadn't let her sister see the way she'd glared at Bert.

She walked into the kitchen, hoping to make a sandwich before anyone gave her a job to do. She heard a baby crying upstairs and knew that her mother was trying to put the kids to bed. "Patsy, before you do anything, go help Mom with the baby. He won't stop crying," said the young woman at the kitchen table. Patsy looked at her sister. She's been crying again, Patsy thought. At least she gets letters.

"Did you get a letter today?" she asked.

"Yes. He's not coming home for months. And he won't even tell me where he is." Mary started crying again, and blew her nose loudly.

"Mary, it's not so bad. There was a woman in the shop today who hasn't heard from her son for two months. And it's not like you can't figure out where Dick is. Just listen to the radio reports. Wherever Patton is, that's where Dick is. Don't be so afraid." Patsy tried to comfort her sister by showing her how well off she really was.

"But he shouldn't be in the service anyway. His heart isn't strong. What if he never comes back?" she mumbled through her tears and hiccups.

"Mary, you know that every man is needed. And they assigned him to Patton because of his heart problem. You know that. Dick is a lot safer than most of the men. You should be grateful that you get letters." Patsy walked from the kitchen toward the stairs, shifting her books from her left arm to her right.

"Oh, Patsy, did you get your letter?" Elizabeth asked as she turned to look at her. "There's a letter from Dick on the mantelpiece," she turned back to the radio.

Patsy set her books down on the bottom step and hurried across the room to the fireplace, straightening her skirt. Bert, who sat near the fire, stood up abruptly, taking the letter from its place. "Is this what you're looking for, kid?" he asked, as he held the letter with his right hand, blocking her way with his barrel-like body.

"Yes, please give it to me," Patsy tried not to look anxious. She started to walk around him, but he moved to block her again, and she was forced to touch his chest.

Bert, noticing her consternation, lifted his arm and held the letter high, almost high enough to touch the ceiling. "Jump for it, little lady. D'ya wan' it or no?" Seeing the smirking grin on his face made Patsy's face burn. She mustn't let him know how much that letter meant.

"Bert." The voice came from near the radio. "Leave her be. I need your help to wind this new yarn. Come here, you have to see it. It's a lovely color..." Elizabeth had gotten the new goods from the drawer of a nearby table, and was babbling about her purchase.

Bert gave up and threw the letter on the fireplace's hearth. Patsy scrambled for it: it was much too near the fire. The dark man nudged her with the foot of his bad leg. "Ya wanted it, eh?" he said as he went to Elizabeth.

Patsy took up the letter and scurried across the room. She paused at the stairs to pick up her books, but avoided looking at Bert. She rushed up the stairs.

"Patsy, is that you? Help me. This baby won't stop crying."

"Just a second, Mother. Let me take my coat off," Patsy said as she turned toward her room. She stepped over the baby toys as she walked over to her bed. She pulled up the spread from the pillow and hid the letter there. It would be safe. She moved to the desk and put her books down among the clean diapers. At least someone did laundry today, she thought.

"Hurry, Patsy. We've been waiting for you for an hour."

Patsy hurried to hang up her coat. As she walked toward the bathroom, she could tell by the crying that her mother had tried to save time again by giving the children a bath all together. The sight she saw in the bathroom would have been funny, if she hadn't been the one who'd have to clean it up. Her mother was sitting on the side of the bathtub, holding the baby in her arms, covered with soap and water. The baby she held by its armpits was crying, and the little girl in the tub had soap on her face that was going to get in her eyes soon. The small boy at the other end of the tub was splashing water on his sister and grandmother, and laughing.

"Butch, you stop that. Now," Patsy said as she picked up the baby from her mother's grasp. The baby already had soap in its eyes, and Patsy took him over to the sink to try to get it out. "Mother, if you could just get Sary washed up and out, I'll get Butch in a second. Just let me take care of the baby first."

"But Patsy, it's time for my radio show. We've been waiting for you too long, and now I'm missing my show. I tried to get your chores done for you, but Butch just won't behave unless you're home." The woman struggled to get up from the edge of the tub. "Patsy, what's that smell? You always come home smelling like the beauty parlor. It's a wonder the children let you hold them, smelling like that. Why are you so late? Didn't you get your work done on time again? I swear, if you weren't so slow, I would have so much less to do." Her mother strutted out of the bathroom.

Patsy's eyes swelled with tears of hurt. I'm trying my best, her mind screamed. Dear God, please help me. I have to get the children to bed so I can do my homework, she said silently, tears streaming down her face.

She picked up the baby and held him to her. The soap was out of his eyes, and he was content as she dried him. She cuddled him for a minute, and turned to the two in the tub. "Butch, you're a big boy. You stay there and watch Sary for a minute, okay? Make sure she doesn't go under the water. I just want to put the baby in his crib. I'll be back in just a second," she said, and hurried toward her room.

She put the baby in his crib, neglecting to dress him at all. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I'll dress you in a minute. At least you're out of the water and dry now," she said as she patted the baby's bottom, and hurried to the bathroom.

When she entered, she smiled with delight at what she saw. Butch had a wash cloth in his hand and was scrubbing his sister's back. She was playing with the little rubber duck, an extravagant toy gotten

before the war. "Thank you, Butch. You're such a big help. Soon you'll be big enough and helpful like your daddy, and you can go fight in the war." She took the cloth from the boy, and began to rinse Sara's back. She watched as Butch began to wash himself and smiled at the look of importance on the boy's five-year-old face. "Don't forget to wash behind your ears," she reminded gently.

When the bathing was done, she looked around the bathroom for the children's nightclothes. Noting that they weren't to be found, she picked up the toddling girl and took the boy's hand. "Come now, let's go find your pajamas." As they walked down the hall, Patsy thought, we must look like refugees from the Pacific theatre. Two naked babies, and an older girl rescuing them from the Japanese.

She was tucking the children in, and almost ready to tell them a bedtime story, but her thoughts were interrupted. "Patsy! What are you doing? Why is my baby lying here without any clothes on? And no blankets — not even a diaper? What are you trying to do? Let him catch pneumonia or polio?" Mary shouted from the room Patsy and the baby shared.

"I'm sorry, Mary, I had to get him out of the tub so I could dress Butch and Sary and put them to bed," Patsy called, as she rushed into the room.

"You should know by now that you can't bathe all of them at once. For a 12-year-old, you certainly are a dunce. I will take care of the baby now. You just try to get the kids to sleep. See if you can do that right," Mary snapped, picking the baby up. "And hurry. It's almost your bedtime, too."

Patsy turned and walked back into the hall. Don't take it hard, she told herself. We're all under a strain, what with the war and all. But I wish Dick would come back soon — he likes to help put the kids to bed. But we all must make sacrifices for the war.

As she walked into the children's room, she pulled up the corners of her mouth with her fingers, forcing a smile. She hoped she had enough energy left to keep it there. "Now, are we all ready for a story?" she asked as she kissed the forehead above the big, brown, frightened eyes of the little girl. Patsy smoothed the covers on the bed, and tickled the feet beneath. Sarah giggled, and the frightened look left her face.

"Once upon a time, there was a big castle on the shore. In it lived a girl with long, smooth, blond hair, and her best friend, a big, green dragon. They were very happy; they had chocolate bars every day, and she even had Red Ball shoes with rubber soles. They would play together on the shore, and the dragon would let the girl walk up the fins on his back like stairs. Then he would go deep into the water, far from the shore. Then the girl, who'd already taken off her sneakers, would kick the water that she could reach from sitting on his back. They had such fun, with just themselves and the water, and the bright sun. But they couldn't stay out in the water always, so they came back to the castle.

"One day, they went to the city to see the girl's uncle. He took them

to places they'd never seen. A museum, a park, and a big, tall building, taller than their castle. The girl and the dragon looked out the window at the top, and saw what their lake looked like from up there. It was very small, and the girl could tell that the arms of the shore finally surrounded it. But Uncle took them down again, and on the way back to the castle, they stopped at White Castle and had a hamburger.

"The next day, the girl and the dragon went to play in the water. It wasn't as much fun, now that they knew that it really was just a pond in the huge world. Soon after, there was a war. The dragon had to go far, far away to help fight..." At this, Patsy realized that the children had slowly fallen asleep. She pretended she hadn't noticed, and continued the story.

"The girl went to live in the city, where she could help with the war. She had to sell her hair, since it was blond, so the soldiers could make bombs. And she had to turn in her rubber-soled shoes. She couldn't eat chocolate any more, but that was all right, since it wasn't the same without her dragon. But she worked hard helping with the war effort. And she knew her dragon would be back soon, and they could go play on the shore again. The sun would shine, and she could wear her sneakers.

"Then she found out, from her uncle, that the dragon wasn't ever coming back. He'd been lost in the war..." Patsy knew what her story was really about, and she started crying. She rushed to turn the light off and left the room, not wanting to wake the children.

She walked down the hall, head down, and stared at the floor. Patsy could see the green, sculptured rug up close, as though through a magnifying glass. She rubbed the tears from her face with the back of her hand, and stopped. I must stop crying. This isn't helping, and I'll just wake the baby. She kept crying anyway.

Remembering the letter, she stole carefully into the bedroom, avoiding the spot on the floor that squeaked. Taking the lamp from the desk, she covered it with one of the baby's extra blankets. Then she put it on the floor next to her bed and turned it on, checking to see if the light would wake the baby. Moving quietly, she went to the pillow, felt for the letter, and took it from its hiding place. Patsy sank to the floor next to her bed, clutching the letter to her chest. She opened it slowly, tearing the end off as Dick had shown her. As she unfolded the page, she smoothed the creases to flatten it, and placed it on her knees. She read slowly, paying close attention to each word.

Dear Patricia,

Here's hoping that everything's well with you.
I'm sure that school is going well, as always.
Don't forget to pay special attention to Latin,
as it is hard.

The war is terrible. But I'm out of most of the fighting,
since I accompany the general and guard him. The
villages and towns are devastated, and many of our

soldiers are being killed. I think God that you and my wife and children are safe at home.

How is the baby? I'm sure that he's thriving under your close care. But don't let him keep you up at night; you need your sleep, too. Is Butch growing? Has Sary learned to walk yet? You must keep me informed of everything, since I can't be there.

Are you still cleaning the beauty parlor? You must be careful not to work too hard. You must stay your happy and cheerful self, so don't work too much. Please give the children a hug and kiss for me.

With love,

Your brother-in-law,

Dick

Patsy closed her eyes, then opened them again quickly and reread the words. I must do everything he says, she thought. I must work as I can.

This made her remember her homework, so she turned the light off and put it back on the desk. Grabbing her schoolbooks, she hurried out, pausing to put her free hand on the sleeping baby's back and give it a pat. It felt odd, as though she couldn't really touch him. She threw her books down, and rubbed his back with her other hand, trying to make contact. The baby gurgled, and she felt him moving. Then she looked at her hand and realized that she'd patted him with the same hand that had the blister from the broom of the beauty parlor. Patsy collected her books, and blew a kiss toward the crib as she walked out.

Muffled sounds of the radio came up the stairs, and she listened as she walked toward them. Her family wasn't listening to their serial; an announcer was saying something about a battle in the Pacific. Patsy hurried to listen, and winced as her feet landed hard on the stairs.

"Shhhh, Patsy. You make too much noise," her mother announced as she walked into the living room.

Mary was crying. Patsy walked quietly to her and touched her shoulder. "It'll be all right. I'm sure he's safe," she whispered, her face near her sister's ear. Mary just nodded and shrugged her hand off.

Patsy stared at the hard floor as she quietly moved to the kitchen. I guess I'm just a stupid kid. But I'm just trying to help — can't they see that? She placed her books on the table and slowly pulled a chair out. Contemplating the floor, she sat down. The hardwood floor was smooth, but there were still a few snags. I don't care, I'll just have to walk carefully, she thought, and she began untying her shoes.

She took them off, stretched her feet, and immediately felt a quick pain. She stood and walked on it, stretching her toes and her arches. I must get some shoes that fit. It's a good thing I've been saving my money. She went back to the table and picked up the old shoes, dusting their dark leather with the hem of her skirt. Then she put them under the table, where they were safe. When I get my new

shoes, I can give these to a poor child. They're still in good condition.

She went to the ice box to get some food for a sandwich. It was almost empty. She would have to go to the market after school tomorrow, unless Elizabeth did. Patsy opened the silverware drawer carefully, so it wouldn't squeak. She took out a knife, and looked at it. Mother really should put this silver away. You never know what can happen when hoodlums are in and out of the house.

"Hey, kid, whatcha doin'? Makin' a sandwich?" the big, gruff voice of Bert startled her.

"Yes. Would you like one?" Patsy continued making her sandwich without looking at him.

"No, I'm fine. I just need a drink." He limped to the ice box and opened it. "Hey, this is almost empty. Too bad your old man didn't have insurance or something. Can't keep the ice box full on just an army pension."

"My father provided for us very well. Please don't talk about him that way," Patsy turned her back to Bert and went to the table with her sandwich.

"Oh, so the little girl does have feelin's. And I thought you were just a little worker bee, jus' working for the queen." Bert took a glass and filled it with whatever liquid was in the pitcher. "Don'tcha ever get tired of takin' care of those brats?"

"No, I love them." And if I don't, who will?

"Must be a good sandwich the way you're munching on it. Isn't it kind of late for a kid your age to be eatin' dinner?" Bert came to the table, bringing the pitcher with him. He set the pitcher down, then dragged a chair from under the table and plopped himself in it.

"I had to work after school."

"Too bad, a kid like you having to work. Me, I can't find a job. The only one they offered me was selling bonds. Can't do too much on a dollar a year," he said, and took big gulps from his glass.

At least it's a dollar, Patsy thought. Why don't you just leave? Go far away, where they need men to work.

"Me with this bum leg, can't do anything," he said and stared up at the ceiling. Patsy could tell that he was ready to start talking about his motorcycle accident.

"Why can't you find a job?" she asked quickly, to break his train of thought. "Factories all could use men. You can lift things, and pack things, and . . ."

"Naw, I never wanted a job like that. I wanted to be a postman, but with this leg. . . naw, I'm just kiddin'," he winked at her. "I could drive a tank, though."

I wish you would. Drive anything, just leave, she thought. She got up to get some milk from the ice box. As she walked by Bert, she tried to stay as far from him as possible. But the kitchen wasn't big enough.

Bert grabbed her arm and twisted it. "Come here, Patsy."

"No, I don't have time. Please, let me go. I have to do my homework." She was struggling, trying to pry his fingers from her arm.

"Stop that wrigglin'. All I wann' do is give ya a hug. Little girls need a

hug sometimes, don'tcha know that?" he pulled her closer to him, and stood up. By now he had both her arms pinned to her sides, and was squeezing her shoulders.

"Stop, you're hurting me," she screamed in a whisper, so no one would be alarmed.

"Naw, you're okay," he said. Then he leaned over and kissed her. He kissed her again, hard, forcing her head back into her shoulder blades.

Her mind raced. She shouted at him in her mind, kicked at him with her feet. But her shoeless feet didn't have much effect. She couldn't get any leverage from the floor, and she was in pain from her head being forced backward.

He changed his grip on her. His arms caught her like a python would. But this left her hands free to push against him. She used him for leverage, timed it, and kicked him hard in his bad knee.

Bert straightened up, losing his grip on her, and leaned over again to grasp his leg. "You little. . ."

"Bert!" He was interrupted by a voice from the living room. "Bert, are you through yet? We want to play canasta." It was Elizabeth's whining voice. "Hurry, we're waiting."

Patsy was backed up to the counter, shaking with anger. She was breathing hard, and forcing the sobs to stay in her throat. He limped toward her, and Patsy ran the other way, toward the back door.

He said nothing. He just walked to the counter where the flour, tea and coffee cannisters sat, and grabbed the small one from the middle. He knew there'd be no tea in it: another effect of the war.

"What are you doing?" Patsy took two steps back toward him, trying to fight whatever his next move would be. Her hands were clenched in fists, and her eyes were wide and filled with hate.

Bert just looked at her as he opened the cannister.

"What are you **doing**? That's my money," she said, trying to tell him to stop. She watched as he took the money out.

"Just a loan," he said, as he set the cannister back down. He strutted out of the kitchen, as much as he could with his limp. He held the money high over his head, victoriously.

Patsy watched him. Tears poured from her eyes after he left, as though his leaving were what she was crying about. She ran to the counter to look in the cannister. There was still something in it, and she shoved her hand in to see how much was left. She felt the coldness of coins, and took them out of the jar. Three nickels, and three pennies, her change after buying surprises for her niece and nephews last week. He had taken the rest.

She put the coins back into the cannister, and slowly placed it on the counter in its place. She went to the kitchen table, sat down, and opened her books.

Her mind still raced, though she tried to slow it down. Why did he do that? Why did he kiss me? If he wanted the money, why didn't he just take it? Why did he do that? What does he want? Why doesn't he go away? What did I do to make him do that?

She forced her mind to concentrate on the page of her Latin book.

Her eyes wandered to the margin. There she had drawn, earlier that day, a friendly dragon. She looked at it, and the tears came again. She folded her arms on the table, hid her face in them, and sobbed.

